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SUBJECT: APOSTOLIC NUNCIO RAISES VATICAN CONCERNS
ABOUT RELIGIOUS FREEDOM IN KUWAIT

¶1. (SBU) Ambassador, DCM, and PolOff met with Mounged El-Hachem, the Apostolic Nuncio to Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, and Yemen, on December 10. El-Hachem praised Kuwait's general atmosphere of religious tolerance but said two concrete issues would receive a great deal of his focus.

¶2. (SBU) First, to provide more worship space for the Roman Catholic community, he will pursue plans to build an unobtrusive two-story structure for prayer and community events that will not offend local sensibilities. El-Hachem said he would be satisfied with renting or buying property -- preferably in the Abbasiyya neighborhood -- and that the Church would be happy to have a Kuwaiti Catholic be the actual owner or renter. (Note: Approximately 200 of Kuwait's 900,000 citizens are Christians. End Note.)

¶3. (SBU) Second, the Church operates three private schools in Kuwait. Catholic students are not permitted to receive any Christian religious instruction and El-Hachem hopes to obtain permission to provide catechism to Catholic schools during the time allotted for the study of Islam by Muslim students. El-Hachem does not want to impose the teaching of Christianity on Muslim students but rather to give Christian students the option of studying their religion as part of the private school curriculum. Currently, the Ministry of Education prohibits any non-Muslim religious instruction in schools.

¶4. (SBU) The Ambassador urged El-Hachem to add a third issue to his list of concerns: the treatment of domestic workers. The Ambassador also suggested that El-Hachem use his influence to keep this issue on the minds of other diplomats. El-Hachem enthusiastically agreed and at some length voiced his personal dismay at instances of abuse of vulnerable employees. He promised to do all he could to seek improved working conditions for these employees. (Note: Many of Kuwait's foreign laborers are Christians and often turn to religious centers when they have problems with their employers. End Note.)

Bio Note

¶5. (SBU) El-Hachem, a Maronite, claims a special

attachment to the U.S., since his father was a U.S.- citizen and World War I veteran before he returned to his homeland of Lebanon. His career includes extensive experience in the Vatican's State Secretariat as well as teaching courses on Islam. He

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mentioned that he was not aware of any past or present native Arab permanent Vatican representatives to the Middle East, and believes his appointment is part of Pope Benedict's initiative to increase the Vatican's diplomatic outreach to the Muslim world. Religious freedom issues in Saudi Arabia clearly worry him more than those in Kuwait, but he has only unofficial responsibilities there.

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